IN THE BEGINNING
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Psalm 29:1–11
Genesis 1:1–5
Mark 1:4–11

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . ."
Genesis 1:1 (NRSV)

You can believe that God exists—either because it is a reasonable intellectual assumption or because it is the creed you were taught—and never so much as set a foot on the road. . . . I warn you: to permit God through the door will radically reorient your spiritual and moral universe. Not I, but the One who transcends me becomes the point of orientation. Not I, but the One whom faith names God comes to be the nexus of meaning. Not I, but God it is who gives shape and purpose to all things. God becomes the One from whom we come, the One unto whom we return, and the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

Michael Lindvall
A Geography of God

You are a mystery beyond our comprehending:
the power beyond all powers, the maker of all that is.
The universe and beyond exist in you and by your will and intent.
So we stammer our praise. Startle us, O God, with your truth,
your light, your love. We pray in the name of your incarnate Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Atheism is not new. In fact, atheism has been around for a long time. What's new is that in our time, these past few years, atheists have come out to make their case publically and have become confrontational, evangelical even. The story is going around about the two urban missionaries, in dark suits, white shirts, and ties, who knock on the front door. When a man comes to the door, they hand him a pamphlet. "Why, this pamphlet is blank," he says. "Yes, we know," they respond. "We're atheists."

And atheists are organizing and acting a lot like a religious denomination. There was a gathering a while ago, the Atheist Alliance International Convention, which probably felt like and acted a lot like the Presbyterian

General Assembly or a Methodist Annual Conference. Just last Wednesday, as I was thinking about this sermon and what to say about the "new atheism," my closest adviser handed me the *New York Times,* which she was reading over coffee. "You might be interested in this," she said. It was an article under the headline, "Atheists Decide to Send Their Own Message on 800 Buses." Jim Forbes, former preaching minister at Manhattan's Riverside Church, told me once that every so often, as he prepared a sermon, he'd receive a "Fax from Heaven." Well, this was truly a "Fax from Heaven." The article reported that in London a Christian evangelical group rented space on the sides of buses and placed an ad that included a verse of scripture and the address of a Christian website. Adriane Sherim was interested, went to the website, and was "startled to learn that she and her nonbelieving friends were headed straight to hell to spend all eternity in torment. 'That's a bit extreme,' she thought, as well as hard to prove." After all, Great Britain does have proof in advertising standards.

So how about a corrective? She started the Atheist Bus Campaign and set out to raise $8,000. Some prominent nonbelievers caught wind of the campaign, and in a few days she had raised $200,000. Last week the ads were unveiled on 800 buses across Britain. "There's Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life." Not to be outdone, the American Humanist Association started its own bus campaign in Washington, D.C., with ads that read a little more gently, "Why Believe in a God?" over a picture of Santa Claus. "Just Be Good for Goodness' Sake."

The *Times* noted the singular lack of outrage. In fact, the British Methodists issued a statement welcoming the ads for inspiring people to think about God.

More seriously, over the past few years there has been a series of best sellers advocating atheism and condemning religion as an utterly negative social force. Christopher Hitchens, author of one of the best sellers, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, calls religion "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children" (quoted in *Image: A Journal of Art, Faith, and Mystery*, Fall 2007, p. 63). Talk-show host Bill Maher echoes that critique regularly and recently produced a motion picture, *Religulous*, which pokes fun and mocks all religions. The *Christian Century* called it a "mockumentary" and found it amusing but ultimately silly. Maher finds the most extreme, curious, bizarre expressions of religion, sets them up, attacks, tears them down. It is so easy to do: interviewing the man who plays Jesus in the Holy Land Experience in Orlando and the members of a truckers' prayer group. "Christians come off as buffoons, Muslims as ticking time bombs" (*Christian Century*, 18 November 2008). Maher, the *Century* review said, simply can't imagine that there are believers who think.

There is some truth to all of it. Religion is violent sometimes, intolerant often. Religion has been used to justify slavery and the oppression of women and children. Religion has opposed free scientific inquiry and academic freedom and is used today to oppose women's reproductive health and family planning and to deny basic human rights on the basis of gender orientation and expression and, in the church, to deny the opportunity for full participation. People who believe in God and love God and love their neighbors and love the church know better than anyone the limits and failures and sins of religion and religious institutions. Robert Frost said he had a "lover's quarrel with the world" and so faithful believers have a lover's quarrel with religion and with the church.

Bill Maher and the other critics have trouble conceding that there are believers who can think and do think, long and hard, about profound questions, like the very existence of God.

Distinguished Roman Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson was asked recently about the new atheism. She responded, "Atheists are rejecting the old images of God that don't really work that well even for Christians anymore. Just who is the God in whom Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, doesn't believe?" Dawkins, Johnson says, "envisions God if not exactly with a white beard, then at least as some kind chap, however supersized. This is not the Christian God." Johnson said she has migrated away from the patriarchal notion of God represented in her patriarchal church. "The notion of God as one who embraces us, in whom we live and move and have our being, is so much more my sense of God than the grand old man in the sky" (quoted in *Context* August 2008).

> In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

That is how the Bible begins. Not with a philosophic argument for the existence of God—there is none of that in the Bible—but with a statement of faith. It is not science. It is not history. Literalists, fundamentalists who try to force it to be history, geology, biology, get it wrong, we believe. To regard the text as literal, historic, documentable, provable fact is to misunderstand and misuse it. Worst of all, it is to set up a false conflict between reason and religion—the conflict the new atheists exploit—and ultimately an unfortunate conflict between religion and science. There is no conflict between religion and science in this text. More on that next week.

What it is is a statement of faith. We know that it was written at a very dark time in the history of Israel for people who were trying to make some sense

out of their desperate circumstances. The question the text was written to answer was not “How exactly and when exactly did we get here?” but “How are we to make sense of the mess we are in?” Atheism was not the issue for them; despair was, hopelessness. And to them and for them came the notion of a good and gracious God who created the world and called it good. That is gospel, good news for people in every age, including our own, who are searching for meaning, trying to make sense of our life in this confusing, conflicted, chaotic world.

When religion buys into the argument that reason—science, if you will—is the only arbiter of truth, it becomes something different. Thomas Aquinas, thirteenth-century philosopher–theologian, one of the most brilliant minds in history, came up with five philosophic proofs for the existence of God. They are pretty good, and they are still taught in philosophy classes. But the best of the theologians have always understood that God, to be God, cannot ultimately be understood or proved by the human mind. Augustine said it best: “If you understand, it isn’t God.”

Karl Barth, maybe the most important Protestant Christian theologian of the twentieth century, wrote twelve volumes of dogmatic theology. Late in his life he imagined approaching heaven with a wheelbarrow full of his Church Dogmatics. “The angels laugh,” he said. “Here comes old Karl with his wheelbarrow full of dogmatics. He thinks he knows. The angels laugh.”

Our friend Bill Placher called it the “domestication of transcendence” and warned about reducing God to the measure of our own intellects, our own understanding. Absolute intellectual certainty about God has a way of turning ugly, even violent. Absolute certainty about who is right and who is wrong, who is going to heaven and who is going to hell turns to intolerance quickly and easily. The Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, suicide bombers, in a sense the religious grounding of the 9/11 perpetrators are all examples of religion that is absolutely sure of itself.

Image, a journal of “faith, art, and mystery,” responded to the new atheism recently by interviewing authors and artists and asking, “Why believe in God?”

The responses are wonderful, based not on proofs but personal experience. Doris Betts describes taking care of her very sick husband of many years before he died, of her struggles with doubt and despair. Like Emily Dickinson, Betts says she believed and disbelieved a hundred times a day. “And yet,” she says, even on bad days there was “from within me, the insistence that even if there’s no God, there ought to be. I keep deciding to believe in God. In this, my seventh decade, faith seems to me not certainty but commitment, a renewable vow” (p. 65).

Author Ron Hansen, when asked why he believed in God, said, “I have felt loved by a concerned and caring holy being greater than my imagination.”

That is all any of us can do finally. Make our witness, tell our story, stammer our praise, remember and treasure and rest in a sense of being loved and cared for by the one who created us and all things, the one who breathed life into us, from whom we came, in whom we live and move and have our being, and to whom we return.

What do Christians believe about God? Obviously, there is no single answer to that question. But relying on my own reading of scripture, theology, and literature and my own experience, this is what one Christian believes:

- That there is one God: not a Jewish God, a Christian God, a Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu God, but one God who created all of us, loves all of us, and is with all of us, always and forever
- That God is the creator of all that is: “Let there be light”—the elemental word calls into being everything that is and it is good, all of it
- That God is not remote, off somewhere in the universe on a heavenly throne, occasionally intervening in human affairs, but God is here, involved in the world and human life, always present, an energy for good, a creative force for beauty and justice and peace
- That God rejoices in us as a parent rejoices in a beloved child and weeps when we suffer, weeps in disappointment, weeps when we fall short of our potential and promise, particularly when we hate and hurt
- That God is love and when we are touched in love, by love, we are touched by God, whether in cradling a newborn, rocking a toddler in our laps, embracing a beloved, a friend, holding a sick and frightened dear one; to be touched in love is to experience God
- That God comes to us in the best of us: the most glorious music we produce, the most beautiful art, most exquisite science, most demanding physical and athletic achievement, most heroic courage
- Finally that God has come to us in the life of the man, Jesus of Nazareth: that he is the Christ, the Son of God, the lens through which we can see as much of God as any of us will ever see until we meet God face to face; it is what makes us Christians—not in an exclusive, arrogant way that insists that everybody else is wrong and condemned to hell but simply our confession that in Jesus Christ, God dwelt among us to show us who God is and who God created us to be
- That the voice that was heard one day, along the bank of the Jordan River, when a young man emerged from the water of his baptism—“This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him”—is for you and me

One of Chicago's great personalities, Studs Terkel, died recently at ninety-six. He lived deeply and wrote widely and eloquently about human life and the wonder and mystery of human beings. He was not a conventionally religious man, but his books revealed a lifelong curiosity and interest: *Hope Dies Last: Keeping the Faith in Troubled Times; Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Reflections on Death.* Not long before he died, he wrote *A Memoir: Touch and Go*.

I was curious about the title he chose, *Touch and Go*, and discovered that it is from a Dylan Thomas poem:

> And every evening at sun-down
> I ask a blessing on the town
> For whether we last the night or no
> I'm sure it's always touch and go.

The book was a gift, and inside Terkel wrote a personal note to me. I will treasure it forever.

> To Rev. John Buchanan—"God bless you," say I—an agnostic = [that is] a cowardly atheist. Studs Terkel

That is how he described himself: as an agnostic, which he joked was just a cowardly atheist. I wouldn't presume to argue with him nor to try to make him into a closet Christian.

But on the last page of his memoir, Terkel quotes a prayer William Sloane Coffin delivered at a Yale commencement, and he concludes the book with Coffin's words, his benediction, Terkel wrote.

> O Lord—take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

The God in whom I believe smiled at that and nodded approval.

Amen.